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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 00959

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 000959

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI; NEA/PPD; NEA/RA; INR/R/MR; PA;
INR/NESA; INR/B; IIP/G/NEA-SA
WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE
SECDEF FOR OASD/PA
USCINCCENT FOR POLAD
LONDON PASS TO MOC, ALSO FOR GOLDRICH; PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OTIP KMDR TC PREL PGOV

SUBJECT: UAE ARAB MEDIA CONFERENCE CALLS FOR REDUCED
GOVERNMENT ROLE

REF: ABU DHABI 158

¶1. (U) The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) held its annual conference entitled "Arab Media in the Information Age" January 9-11, 2005. A common theme throughout the conference was the need for Arab governments to reduce their roles in controlling the media. Despite a large number of American and Arab-American presenters, the tone of the conference was decidedly anti-American. Wadah Khanfar, general manager of Al-Jazeera, was hailed as a strong symbol of resistance against both the U.S. and Arab regimes. Several speakers and attendees raised ethical concerns about the issue of journalists embedded with U.S. forces. End Summary

¶2. (U) Information Specialist, IRC Director and PAO Abu Dhabi attended several sessions of the 2005 ECSSR conference. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, UAE Minister of Defense and Crown Prince of Dubai and Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed, Minister of Information and youngest son of former UAE President Zayed, delivered keynote addresses (see reftel). Twenty-eight speakers from the UAE, other GCC countries, the U.S., U.K., Germany and other countries

participated. Some of the more prominent speakers included:

--Dr. Ali Fakhro, Minister of Education, Bahrain
--Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, GM of Al-Arabiyah
--Greg Dike, Former CEO of the BBC
--Wadhah Khanfar, GM of Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel
--Jean Abi Nader, Arab-American Institute
--James Zogby, Director of the Arab-American Institute
--Jack Shaheen, Professor of Mass Communication, University of Southern Illinois
--Dr. Hussein Ibish, an American freelance journalist
--Michael Hudson, Professor of Arab Contemporary Studies, Georgetown University

¶3. (U) Despite the large number of American and Arab-American speakers, the tone during the three-day conference was critical of the United States. Information Specialist Abu Dhabi witnessed a distinctively anti-American tone in the question and answer sessions following each session by an American presenter. Conference participants accused American media institutions of double standards as related to media freedom. They stated that U.S. media organizations claim to promote freedom of the media in the Arab world on the one hand, but at the same time routinely accuse Arab media outlets of promoting hatred and extremism because they broadcast reports critical of U.S. policies.

AL-JAZEERA - HEROES THAT CONTINUE TO DEFY THE U.S.

¶4. (U) Wadhah Khanfar, general manager of Al-Jazeera, was one of the stars of the conference. His lecture on day one was one of the most widely attended and well received. His paper, entitled, "Credibility of News Channels: Competing for Viewers" addressed the credibility of news channels in general, and the perceived high degree of credibility of Al-Jazeera in the Arab world, in particular. In response to a question posed by a member of the audience about whether media professionals should be neutral in covering all news, Khanfar responded as follows,

".out of my experience, I can say that you cannot be neutral all of the time. When I was covering Mosul in Northern Iraq, I caught on camera looters and thieves that ran into the city's museum, one of the most important museums in Iraq. I thought for a moment about whether I should remain neutral in covering such an event, but at once decided to take a position. If I had remained neutral, I would have had to interview one of the looters and pass his opinions on to my viewers. I could never do this." He concluded by stating that, ".in questions that are clearly black and white, you simply cannot remain neutral." This remark elicited thunderous applause by the audience of several hundred. During the discussion following the presentation, a member of the audience attributed the on-going confrontation between the USG and Al-Jazeera to a desire by the USG to include its disagreements with Al-Jazeera in its overall war with Arabs and Muslims. Another audience member stated that Wadhah Khanfar and Al-Jazeera have become, and continue to be, heroes in the Arab world because they represent the only institutions, including corrupt Arab regimes, capable of defying the will of the U.S.

AMERICAN "LIBERATION" OF IRAQ COMMENT ELICITS PROFANITY FROM YEMENI OFFICIAL

¶6. (U) Hussein Sinjari, an Iraqi Kurd and president of the Iraqi Institute for Democracy, spoke on the Impact of Occupation on Freedom of the Press. He cited several examples of positive developments, including an end to the repressive conditions experienced by journalists, a "sky rocketing" in the number of new, independent newspapers, and the absence of censorship. He also highlighted some of the challenges, including partisan interference and unequal access to advertising. At one point during the

presentation, Sinjari referred several times to the American occupation of Iraq as "Iraqi liberation." In response to this reference, a representative of the Yemeni Ministry of Information, stormed out of the room, angrily shouting profanities at Mr. Sinjari.

EMBEDDED JOURNALISM, GOVERNMENT CONTROL AND ARAB-AMERICAN MEDIA SUMMIT

¶7. (U) Throughout the conference, speakers and participants hotly debated the issue of embedded journalists accompanying U.S. forces in combat zones. Dr. Richard Caplan, official fellow in International Relations at the Oxford University, gave a presentation entitled, "Media Credibility in War: The Phenomenon of Embedded Reports." Dr. Caplan asserted that while embedded journalism is not new, efforts by the DOD to influence and control news coverage was of concern. He suggested that by embedding journalists with combat forces, the quality of reporting could be negatively affected, resulting in a uni-dimensional perspective that expresses sympathy and bias toward his/her host forces. He also indicated that self-censorship, uncritical use of government materials and lack of local knowledge, also affect the quality of reporting. During the ensuing discussion, participants expressed concern that the U.S. Administration is attempting to control the free flow of information from Iraq by not allowing journalists to operate independently. There was a general agreement among the session participants, that embedded journalists lose their objectivity and are subjected to the ethical dilemma of getting too close to the soldiers.

¶8. (U) Press coverage of the conference focused on liberating media professionals and organizations from the constraints of government control. In a report entitled, "Do not take us lightly, warn Arab journalists," Addul Aziz Al Jarallah, Editor-in-Chief of the As Siyassah newspaper in Kuwait noted that, "Freedom is very limited and most Arab governments have come to power in other ways than general elections. the Arab media as a product of civil society is non-existent. we need a long time to remove the impact of Arab governments on the formation of the Arab media." Abdullah Al Olayan of the Oman Establishment for Press, News, Publications and Advertising indicated that Arab governments have sought to maintain continuous control over their media institutions. He stated that, "The Arab media has remained under the control of their governments in order to serve their goals." He went on to state that he hoped the advent of the information age would lead to a decline in the influence of Arab governments on the media.

¶9. (U) Several leading non-media professionals spoke about the influence of Arab media on education, criticizing these media institutions for being highly commercialized and compromising standards and quality. Dr. Ali Mohammed Fakhro, former Bahraini Education Minister, indicated that young Arabs today have diverse sources of knowledge due to the Arab media renaissance and cited the need for managed and balanced interaction between these sources. He went on to say that the potential negative effects of the Arab media on the development and growth of youth are so powerful that they threaten to fully counter the benefits of education. In an effort to offset this effect, he called for greater linkage and coordination between the media and education institutions in the Arab world. Dr. Ali Q. Al Shuaibi, Director of the Security Awareness Department, Dubai Police, warned that the ability of the media to negatively affect Arab youth is a "real ethical catastrophe." He stated that the Arab media was heavily influenced by western values, in contradiction to traditional Arab values.

¶10. (U) Jack Shaheen, Professor Emeritus of the School of Mass Communication at Southern Illinois University and

prominent Arabist, called for an international summit to be hosted in the U.S., focusing on Arab-American media relations. The summit would seek to defuse Islamic-American tensions and help reduce dehumanizing stereotypes. "It is imperative that a summit take place, one that allows Americans and Arab image-makers an opportunity to exchange views. As a result of the summit, the word, Arab, might no longer remain a synonym for terrorist."

COMMENT

¶11. (U) During the 2005 ECSSR Annual Conference three opinions about the Arab media emerged. Some education officials and other non-media professionals expressed a backward-thinking perspective attributing concerns about commercialism and lack of quality programming to "negative Western influences." They challenged Arab media institutions to play a positive role in the development of their societies by focusing on promoting core Arab and Islamic values, rather than seeking profit and market share. In contrast, UAE government officials, (reftel) called on attendees to serve as the driving force of media reform in the Arab world, blamed Arab governments for stifling dissent and called for an end to laws confining the Arab media. The media professionals themselves were strongly critical of Arab governments imposing limits on the media and accused them of using the media for their own purposes, rather than for the benefit of their societies. At the same time, they exhibited strong support for Wahdah Khanfar and Al-Jazeera, highlighting the defiant streak among Arab media institutions against the perceived efforts of the USG and U.S.-based media organizations to undermine Al-Jazeera's credibility and wide support in the Arab world.

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